Teaching Soft Skills

by Cheddar Tutorials

WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will explore key practices for teaching the soft skills to employees in the workplace by discussing:

1. HARD REALITIES OF THE SOFT SKILLS GAP
2. ONBOARDING AND UP-TO-SPEED TRAINING
3. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT
4. BECOMING A TEACHING MANAGER

1. HARD REALITIES OF THE SOFT SKILLS GAP

Bruce Tulgan describes the realities of the soft skills gap this way:

Maybe you are thinking: "Wait a minute. I know some young people who are great at professionalism, critical thinking, and followership!" Of course you do! And I do, too! It seems like now is a good time for me to make it clear that, even nowadays, there are many young people with excellent soft skills. It's just that there are not enough of them—it's a supply and demand thing. That's especially true among young people with in-demand technical skills, among whom there is a shortage to begin with. Over and over again, we hear from leaders and managers at all levels that the soft skills gap is not going away. If anything, it is getting worse. And it's not just about the youngest people in the workplace. Overall, this gap has been developing for decades. The costs are great, the opportunity costs are even greater, and yet the problem stands right there in plain sight, not even hiding. Why does this problem evade solutions?

There are three reasons:

First, you cannot hire your way around the soft skills gap, at least not entirely. If you are hiring for a low-supply high-demand technical-skill job, you probably won't be able to select out all those with weak soft skills. If you are hiring for non-technical jobs, then soft skills are among the only criteria, making the demand for those with strong soft skills very high, despite the low supply.

Second, soft skills cannot be spoon fed to young people or forced upon them. Soft skills are all about the regulation of the self. They must be fully embraced in order to be learned. You have to help Gen Zers to care enough about soft skills that their self-building drive is turned on and focused on mastering the missing soft skills.

Third, you probably don't have a lot of extra time or resources to pull your Gen Zers out of work and send them for soft skills training, or to create your own Boot Camp (like the Marines) to break down new workers and systematically rebuild them. If you are like most managers, then you deal with soft skill gap issues when they arise: when an employee is late, or inappropriate, or makes an error in judgment, or there are conflicts on the team, or there is a bad customer service interaction. You deal with the problem. Maybe you note the issue. Maybe if it is a recurring ongoing issue with an employee, you really drill down and try to deal with the problem. In any case, unless you are the rare exception, your approach to dealing with the soft skills gap is probably ad hoc, hit or miss.

> **CASE STUDY**
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> Senior leaders in U.S. intelligence agencies have been grappling with the impact of steadily rising zero- to five-year employee turnover rates among new young intelligence professionals. This is a particularly pressing issue because intelligence agencies make an unusually large investment in new hires due to the elaborate selection criteria, the need to gain security clearance, the extensive requisite training, and the sensitive nature of the work and information to which employees are often privy. So it is a big problem when that investment walks out the door before the new young professionals have a chance to contribute to the mission. One intelligence official told me: "No matter how hard we try to develop a profile to help us select for retention—to predict who will be longer-term employees—it just doesn't work. We used to be able to do it. But it doesn't work anymore. Maybe there is no 'type' anymore who stays or a 'type' who goes. I'm afraid that the young people joining now who serve long-term will end up that way, not by deciding that today, but instead by deciding every few months or years to not leave just yet. We are making a lot of adjustments. But how are we supposed to identify the right high potentials to start developing for new leadership roles? It makes succession planning very difficult. Too often, those identified for promotion end up deciding to leave, taking with them the huge investment we've made in them."

In our training seminars, when I start talking about these difficult realities, managers start nodding their heads and listening carefully. I often say, "I don't have any easy answers because easy answers work only in fantasyland. What I do have is a lot of difficult partial solutions." That's when managers in the real world know that I really have something to offer them. All I do in my seminars is teach managers how to imitate the best practices that the most effective managers are doing successfully every single day.

How are the most effective managers bridging the soft skills gap every day?

Here's the number one thing they have in common: They recognize the incredible power of soft skills—in themselves and in others and in organizations and teams. They understand what can go wrong when individuals or teams or organizations have big gaps in their soft skills. Even more important, they understand how much can go so incredibly right—the extraordinary potential for added value—as a result of unlocking the power of soft skills.

2. ONBOARDING AND UP-TO-SPEED TRAINING

Bruce Tulgan describes onboarding this way:

Ask yourself: What happens when your new young employees walk through the door on day one? How do you leverage those first days and weeks?

You won't be surprised that my platinum standard for on-boarding and up-to-speed training is the Marine's Boot Camp. For thirteen solid weeks, they provide an all-encompassing 24/7 experience in which they take an ordinary human being and transform that person into a Marine—a person with a unique set of self-management skills, problem-solving skills, and people skills—a person so connected to the Marine Corps and its mission and every other Marine that this person is now ready to walk into the line of fire, literally, and win battles.

You don't need obstacle courses and firing ranges. You don't need to make your newly hired employees do push-ups in the sand in the middle of the night. But take the lesson: What message are you sending about standards and expectations for high priority behaviors from day one?

First, make sure you know exactly what happens with your new hires in the formal orientation, on-boarding, and up-to-speed train- ing. Most employers have only a minimal process for welcoming new employees and getting them on-board and up-to-speed. Obviously, some employers are better at this than others. Typically, employers provide a basic introduction to the mission and history of the organization (or not), they give the basic facts and figures (or not), have new employees meet some of the key players (or not), receive a primer in the policies and paperwork (or not), and maybe some of the rules and traditions (or not).

Second, consider the inevitable hand-off to the hiring manager (maybe that is you), once the official orientation program is complete. That's where so much of the real on-boarding action is going to happen, and that's exactly where the ball is so often dropped. Don't drop that ball.

If you want to send the message that those behaviors are truly a high priority, then you have to pay more than lip service. How much of your on-boarding and up-to-speed training is dedicated to spelling out performance standards and expectations for those high priority soft skill behaviors? How much time is dedicated to championing those behaviors and teaching them?

Here's a pretty simple rule: It should be about half.

As one savvy leader in a very successful retail chain put it to me: "For every hour we spend teaching a cashier how to operate the register, we spend at least an hour teaching her customer service skills— how to interact with customers and how to solve their problems."

Of course, it doesn't have to be half and half. Maybe the best approach is to have a dynamic integrated approach to on-boarding and up-to-speed training that is designed in every way to send a powerful message about high standards and expectations for employees' attitudes and behavior in relation to work.

One of my favorite companies is a rental car company that prides itself on hiring only college graduates for every position, no matter how entry level. They also pride themselves on an on-boarding process that not only teaches every new hire the business, but also makes it 1,000 percent clear to new hires exactly what kind of workplace citizenship is expected of every single employee. On top of hours upon hours of training, with computer based tools and hands-on coaches, new hires can expect to find themselves out in the parking lot washing cars. Everybody—from the top to the bottom—in this organization is expected to wash cars. Nobody is too important to wash cars. In between washing cars, new hires are expected to study. And study they do, because each week they must demonstrate proficiency in a range of subjects, including the company's

computer system, details about the company's fleet, insurance, reservations, sales, marketing, customer service, billing, administration, decision making with everyday situations, corporate philosophy, and on and on.

The training materials spell out everything new hires must learn from week to week. And they study every night because—from day one—they are expected to be working, helping out in any way they can, during the day. There are also weekly coaching sessions with a fellow employee; each new hire is assigned a coach. There are tests at the thirty-day mark, at sixty days, and at ninety days. This incredibly impressive program, which the company runs on the job in thousands of rental car shops all over the world, teaches new hires not just how to run the business, but also inculcates a powerful sense of the kind of work ethic and commitment the company requires. The results can be seen in every corner of this world-class organization. Their on-boarding program is not exactly the Marine Corps Boot Camp, but it is truly profound in its impact.

Of course, on-boarding and up-to-speed training needn't be profound. Let me give you a more mundane example. In one large company that hires a lot of new young engineers, managers and more experienced engineers were increasingly frustrated with some of the work habits of many of their new young engineers, including their email communication habits. A senior director of engineering in this company told me: "When it came to email, they did a bunch of things that drove everybody crazy: They would do every email 'no no': red flag emails indiscriminately, cc too many people on emails, or reply all to the wrong things, fail to change subject lines. But in particular they would send lots of very short email messages from their hand-held devices instead of composing a proper email. We developed a list of do's and don'ts for email communication and we built in a thirty-minute module in orientation." How did that work? "Problem solved."

I have a very similar story from a top accounting firm. Managers in this firm had noticed a growing pattern of "poor meeting manners" among new young staff accountants. What are "poor meeting manners"? According to one senior partner: "Poor attendance, late arrival, constantly looking at their devices, lack of preparation, interrupting, going way off topic, making inappropriate comments . . . I could go on." The solution was very similar: The firm began explicitly teaching new hires how to prepare for and conduct themselves in meetings. It was so successful that the firm leadership decided to overhaul everybody's "meeting manners." As it turned out, it wasn't just the new associates whose meeting manners were not so great. After they developed the "meeting manners" program, the leadership realized that everybody in the firm could benefit from learning and observing these best practices for meetings. As a result, said the senior partner, "We had a real change in our culture around meetings. People in this firm became religious about following the rules of conduct. Our meetings got much better, and they remain so. It's a centerpiece of our culture now."

Gee, maybe that's mundane and profound at the same time.

3. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Bruce Tulgan describes performance management this way:

Most large organizations have some sort of formalized performance management system, and nowadays more and more are extending those systems to also take a more structured approach to talent development. The essence of performance management and talent development is simple.

It's all about continuous improvement:

- Setting clear goals

- Monitoring and measuring actual performance in relation to those goals

- Providing feedback, direction, and guidance

- Problem solving and troubleshooting

- Identifying opportunities to speed up or increase quality

- Recognizing and rewarding success

- Identifying high performers for key assignments, opportunities, and promotions

Organizations with formalized systems typically start with annual or quarterly corporate goals and then cascade those larger goals down the chain of command to each division, department, team, and individual. This is to create alignment from the top to the bottom so that everybody is moving in the same direction at the same time. In any case, at the individual level, employees typically spell out goals for themselves—annual goals and quarterly goals, and if they are smart, then they take the process further to monthly and weekly and maybe even daily goals. Usually, these goals are primarily focused on key performance indicators—revenue or profitability, maybe, or else productivity (output) or quality (negative error rate)—related to the individual employee's specific tasks, responsibilities, and projects. While soft skill behaviors have a huge impact on any individual's performance when it comes to key performance indicators, the specific behaviors may not be spelled out explicitly or identified as specific goals in a performance management system.
Usually, when soft skill behaviors are spelled out—if at all—in a formal performance management system would be in one of two cases:

1. If an employee is failing to meet performance goals, then corrective measures might be spelled out in terms of an employee's specifically related sub-optimal soft skills behaviors. The problem is that, often, by this point it's already too late. If you wait until an employee has demonstrated a track record of failure on a key soft skill behavior, then the performance management system is probably going to serve simply as a way to document that failure and provide a paper trail to help fire that person.

2. Soft skill behaviors might be included as part of an individual's personal goals and/or for "professional development." The problem is that this often is the part of the employee's performance goals that are given the least weight and the least attention. Employees are likely to give these goals weight and attention in direct proportion to how much the organization does.

As a seasoned leader in a top financial services firm told me: "Your people can tell whether you really take this stuff seriously and they can tell if you don't. If you measure it, they pay attention. If there are consequences for failure, they pay attention. If there are rewards for success, they pay attention. When you identify top performers, the smart ones look and see, 'What makes that person successful?' If that person is rewarded and promoted despite their failures on those soft skills, people pay attention to that. They say, 'Oh, if you make your numbers, that's what really matters.' But if you hold people back when they fail on those soft skills, despite making the numbers, then people pay attention to that, too. What you measure and what has consequences and what gets rewarded, that's what your people are going to focus on."

Your employees can only focus on so many things at once. And you can only focus on so many things at once. If high priority behaviors are truly high priorities, then you must make that clear with real stakes in your performance management and talent development. Whether you have a formalized system or not, remember, whatever you measure and what has consequences and what gets rewarded, that is what they are going to focus on.

If you want your employees to really focus on high priority soft skill behaviors, then you need to:

- Set clear goals for specific behaviors
- Monitor and measure each employee's actual performance on

those specific behaviors in relation to those goals

- Provide candid feedback, direction, and guidance on those

behaviors

- Problem solve and troubleshoot when course correction is

necessary

- Identify opportunities to improve on those specific behaviors
- Recognize and reward success on those specific behaviors
- Identify high performers for key assignments, opportunities,

and promotions based on success on those specific behaviors

Your employees need to know exactly what is expected and required of them when it comes to high priority soft skills behaviors— every step of the way. They also need to know that their performance will be measured and that the score will have real consequences for failure and real rewards for success.

4. BECOME A TEACHING STYLE MANAGER

Bruce Tulgan recommends the following:

Managers often ask me: "At what point can I back off on giving them so much attention?" My answer: "Whenever you want to start losing that employee's best efforts."

Surely some Gen Zers need more attention than others. But they all need your attention. The superstars want to be recognized and rewarded, but they also want managers who are in a position to help them do more, better, and faster and earn more for their hard work. Low performers are the only ones who don't want their managers' attention, but they need it more than any- one. And mediocre performers—the vast majority of employees who are somewhere in the middle of the performance spectrum— often don't know what they want from a manager. But the fastest way to turn a mediocre performer into a low performer is to leave that person alone without any guidance, direction, support, or coaching. Your job is to lift up all those employees and help them do more work—faster and better every step of the way. Not just because that's good for business, but also because continuous improvement is the key to keeping Gen Zers focused and motivated.

Gen Zers want managers who know who they are, know what they are doing, and are in a position to help. They want managers who spend enough time with them to teach them the tricks and the shortcuts, warn them of pitfalls, and help them solve problems. They want managers who are strong enough to support them through bad days and counsel them through difficult judgment calls. They want to know you are keeping track of their successes and helping them get better and better every day. That's what I call a "teaching style manager."

Being a "teaching style manager" means:

- Talk about what's going right, wrong, and average every step of the way.
- Remind everybody of broad performance standards regularly.
- Turn best practices into standard operating procedures, and

teach them to everybody.

- Use plans and step-by-step checklists whenever possible.
- Focus on concrete actions within the control of the individual employee.
- Monitor, measure, and document individual performance in writing.
- Follow up, follow up, follow up, and provide regular candid feedback.
- Ask really good questions.
- Listen carefully.
- Answer questions.
- Get input.
- Learn from what your employees are learning on the front line.
- Think through potential obstacles and pitfalls and make back-up planning part of every work plan.
- Anticipate and prepare.
- Train and practice.
- Strategize together.
- Provide advice, support, motivation, and even inspiration once in a while.

Teaching-style management is also how you can help your most ambitious Gen Zers who are so eager to take on more and more challenges and responsibilities. Gen Zers often tell us, "I can do so much more than I am doing. I want to do so much more than I am doing. But I don't want to do more of the same. I want to do something new and different."

While this desire is a valuable impulse on the part of self-starting Gen Zers, it also poses two significant challenges to their immediate managers:

1. First, their job is to get the work done, whatever the work happens to be. Sometimes there are no new and interesting challenges. But wait. That doesn't need to be the end of the discussion. Help them make their current work new and interesting by teaching them to leverage knowledge, skill, and wisdom to do their work better, whatever that work happens to be. As soon as they walk in the door, have all new employees create individualized learning plans in which they map out their responsibilities, and for each responsibility, make a list of learning resources (books, people, specific websites). Encourage them to set learning goals and then keep a journal of what they are learning and how they are using it on the job.

2. Second, if you have truly new and interesting challenges for Gen Zers, then you will have to make the time to teach them how to do that new and interesting work. You can't just give them a new challenge and say, "Figure it out." The secret is to teach and transfer just one small task/responsibility at a time. Make sure the person masters each new task/responsibility before you transfer another. You can train them the old-fashioned way in short-term stages that track directly with adjustments in their day-to-day responsibilities. Every new task turns into a proving ground, which enables them to demonstrate proficiency and earn more responsibility right away. Don't fall for the myth that Gen Zers only want to learn from computers. That's

nonsense. Remember, they love grown-ups. They want to learn from people. They want to learn from you. You will never really take the place of a parent, but if you can truly become a trusted teaching style manager, that is about as close as you can get.

Source: Tulgan, B. (2015). Bridging the Soft Skills Gap: How to Teach the Missing Basics to Todays Young Talent. Chapter 1, p. 29-31; Chapter 2 p. 39-44, 51-53. [VitalSource Bookshelf]. Retrieved from https://bookshelf.vitalsource.com/#/books/9781119138150